

Gendering Secession

Gendering Secession explores the lives and politics of South Carolina's elite white women from 1859 to 1861. The political drama that unfolded during the secession crisis of 1860 has long captured our attention, but scant regard has been paid to the secessionist women themselves. These women were astute political observers and analysts who filtered their "improper" political ideas through avenues gendered as feminine and therefore socially acceptable. In recreating the rhythms of the year 1860, Melissa DeVelvis spotlights the moments when women realized that national events were too overwhelming to dismiss. Women processed these changes through religious metaphor and prophecy, comparisons to history and the American Revolution, and language borrowed from popular novels. Drawing from emotions history, literary analysis, and even handwriting analysis, DeVelvis reveals how these fiercely patriotic South Carolinian women responded to threats of disunion with fears and misgivings that men would not or could not express.

MELISSA DEVELVIS is Assistant Professor of History at Augusta University. Her work has been published in *The Washington Post* and the *Journal of American Studies*.

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES ON THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Series Editors:

Mark M. Smith, *University of South Carolina, Columbia*
 Peter Coclanis, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Editor Emeritus:

David Moltke-Hansen

Interdisciplinary in its scope and intent, this series builds upon and extends Cambridge University Press's longstanding commitment to studies on the American South. The series offers the best new work on the South's distinctive institutional, social, economic, and cultural history and also features works in a national, comparative, and transnational perspective.

Titles in the Series

- Melissa DeVelvis, *Gendering Secession: White Women and Politics in South Carolina, 1859–1861*
 Lacy K. Ford, *Understanding the American South: Slavery, Race, Identity, and the American Century*
 David Stefan Doddington, *Old Age and American Slavery*
 John C. Rodrigue, *Freedom's Crescent: The Civil War and the Destruction of Slavery in the Lower Mississippi Valley*
 Elijah Gaddis, *Gruesome Looking Objects: A New History of Lynching and Everyday Things*
 Damian Alan Pargas, *Freedom Seekers: Fugitive Slaves in North America, 1800–1860*
 Sebastian N. Page, *Black Resettlement and the American Civil War*
 Hayden R. Smith, *Carolina's Golden Fields: Inland Rice Cultivation in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1670–1860*
 Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Thomas Jefferson: A Modern Prometheus*
 Joan E. Cashin, *War Stuff: The Struggle for Human and Environmental Resources in the American Civil War*
 David Stefan Doddington, *Contesting Slave Masculinity in the American South*
 Lawrence T. McDonnell, *Performing Disunion: The Coming of the Civil War in Charleston, South Carolina*
 Enrico Dal Lago, *Civil War and Agrarian Unrest: The Confederate South and Southern Italy*
 Daniel J. Vivian, *A New Plantation World: Sporting Estates in the South Carolina Low Country, 1900–1940*
 Eugene D. Genovese, ed. Douglas Ambrose, *The Sweetness of Life: Southern Planters at Home*
 Donald G. Mathews, *At the Altar of Lynching: Burning Sam Hose in the American South*
 Keri Leigh Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South*
 Katherine Rye Jewell, *Dollars for Dixie: Business and the Transformation of Conservatism in the Twentieth Century*

- Sarah Gardner, *Reviewing the South: The Literary Marketplace and the Southern Renaissance, 1920–1941*
- William Thomas Okie, *The Georgia Peach: Culture, Agriculture, and Environment in the American South*
- Karlos K. Hill, *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory*
- William A. Link and James J. Broomall, eds., *Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies of Slavery and the Quest for Black Freedom*
- James Van Horn Melton, *Religion, Community, and Slavery on the Colonial Southern Frontier*
- Damian Alan Pargas, *Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South*
- Craig Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., *Death and the American South*
- Barton A. Myers, *Rebels against the Confederacy: North Carolina's Unionists*
- Louis A. Ferleger and John D. Metz, *Cultivating Success in the South: Farm Households in Postbellum Georgia*
- Luke E. Harlow, *Religion, Race, and the Making of Confederate Kentucky, 1830–1880*
- Susanna Michele Lee, *Claiming the Union: Citizenship in the Post–Civil War South*
- Kathleen M. Hilliard, *Masters, Slaves, and Exchange: Power's Purchase in the Old South*
- Ari Helo, *Thomas Jefferson's Ethics and the Politics of Human Progress: The Morality of a Slaveholder*
- Scott P. Marler, *The Merchants' Capital: New Orleans and the Political Economy of the Nineteenth-Century South*
- Ras Michael Brown, *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry*
- Johanna Nicol Shields, *Freedom in a Slave Society: Stories from the Antebellum South*
- Brian Steele, *Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood*
- Christopher Michael Curtis, *Jefferson's Freeholders and the Politics of Ownership in the Old Dominion*
- Jonathan Daniel Wells, *Women Writers and Journalists in the Nineteenth-Century South*
- Peter McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry*
- Robert E. Bonner, *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood*

Gendering Secession

White Women and Politics in South
Carolina, 1859–1861

MELISSA DEVELVIS

Augusta University



Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-21785-9 — Gendering Seccession
Melissa DeVelvis
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009217859

DOI: 10.1017/9781009217811

© Melissa DeVelvis 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the
DOI 10.1017/9781009217811

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DeVelvis, Melissa, author.

Title: Gendering seccession : white women and politics in South Carolina,
1859–1861 / Melissa DeVelvis, Augusta University.

Description: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2025. |

Series: Cambridge studies on the American South | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024024294 | ISBN 9781009217859 (hardback) | ISBN
9781009217842 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009217811 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women, White – Political activity – South Carolina – History –
19th century. | South Carolina – Politics and government – 1775-1865. | South
Carolina – History – 1775-1865.

Classification: LCC F273 .D527 2025 | DDC 973.7/1308209757–dc23/eng/20240911
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024024294>

ISBN 978-1-009-21785-9 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain,
accurate or appropriate.

To my sisters, “the DeVelvi,” Addie and Paige

Contents

List of Figures	<i>page</i> x
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
1 1859, the Last Fully Antebellum Year	35
2 “The Gay Season,” January–May 1860	74
3 Escaping the Sickly Season, May–September 1860	93
4 South Carolina Takes Action, October– December 1860	126
5 The Waiting Game, December 1860–March 1861	161
6 Catharsis and Conclusion: Fort Sumter, the Road to Bull Run, and a Peek at Postbellum	186
Bibliography	204
Index	219

Figures

I.1	Meeting calling for the South Carolina legislature to hold a secession convention.	<i>page 16</i>
4.1a	Sarah Burn to Susan Burn.	129
4.1b	Sarah Burn to Susan Burn, page 2.	130
4.2	Keziah Brevard's diary, November 1860.	132
4.3	Brevard's entry on Lincoln's election.	133
6.1	The house-tops in Charleston during the bombardment of Sumter.	188

Acknowledgments

I was born in Georgia. I received my undergraduate degree from the University of Georgia. I teach in Georgia. But there's something about South Carolina, and I just can't get away. Even now, my home in Augusta is five miles from the state line, and our segment of the Savannah River region encompasses both states. I love South Carolina in spite of (and because of) its messy history. I hope my book reflects this.

I have been pondering southern women and secession for a decade now, somehow. My advisor, Mark Smith, guided the dissertation phase of this project from start to finish and affirmed that my wild ideas had merit. He is a model of what historical writing can and should be. I am privileged to have been one of the last students of Marjorie Spruill before her retirement; the mentorship she provided me is invaluable. She made sure that I had a near-encyclopedic knowledge of US women's history, and that I would feel welcome in every room she was in. My two thesis readers and powerhouse scholars, Woody Holton and Sarah Gardner, suggested changes that made this book what it is.

The early stages of my research were funded by my graduate institution: the University of South Carolina History Department. I had the delightful privilege of spending three months at Mount Vernon as a fellow at the Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington while I researched the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. Thank you to Kevin Butterfield, Stephen McLeod, and Samantha Snyder for all the help you provided when I was there. Samantha in particular needs a shoutout for helping transcribe one of the worst letters I've seen to date. My current institution, Augusta University, has not only provided me with funding but even two

xii ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

course reductions to devote more time to this work. Thank you to Kim Davies, the Dean of Pamplin College; my department chair, Ruth McClelland-Nugent; and Dustin Avent-Holt, the head of the Center for Social Science Research. I received moral and intellectual support from my university colleagues Joseph Bradshaw, LeeAnn Caldwell, John Hayes, Thom Loyd, DJ Polite, Natasha Robinson, Lita Sacks, and Stacey Thompson.

Thank you to the South Carolina Historical Society for letting me live in your reading room for a month, and thank you to Virginia Ellison for helping when I was there. Though I don't wish to add to any Charleston – Columbia rivalries, the South Caroliniana Library will always be my home. It is highly advised that one befriend the archivists, and this becomes much easier when you also work at the archive for years. Thanks to my former coworkers and friends: Edward Blessing, Taryn Cooksey, Nick Doyle, Nathan Saunders, Allen Stokes, Elizabeth West, and, most of all, Graham Duncan. I found Mary Cox Chesnut's papers regarding the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association not through my own research, but because Graham gave me a collection to process that also applied to my interests.

Thanks to those who have mentored me or given advice on this manuscript: Steve Berry, Judkin Browning, Lori Carey (my academia mom), Matt Childs, Hilary Green, John Hayes, Anya Jabour, Stephanie McCurry, Jason Phillips, Valinda Littlefield, and Michael Woods. When I was an overachieving undergrad, Steve gave me his transcriptions of the letters of Georgia and Florence King, two young sisters who lived on Saint Simons Island, Georgia. I noticed that they discussed secession, and that their differing personalities led to drastically different interpretations of the same events. From there, it was off to the races, and Steve helped me long after his responsibilities as my undergraduate thesis advisor ended.

My generation of historians are some of the best people out there. All of the following people, whom I have to list or else this section would be a book chapter in itself, are excellent scholars but

better friends. Charlotte Adams, Tracy Barnett, Olivia Brown, Rich Condon, Laura Davis, Angela Elder, Jill Found, Patrice Green, Robert Greene, Bingo Gunter, Lauren Haumesser, Zoe Horecny, Jonathan Jones, Anthony Keane-Dawes, Christian Lear, Patrick Lewis, Brian Neumann, Maurice Robinson, Helena Yoo Roth, Madeline Steiner, Carlie Todd, Rebekah Turnmire, Trae Welborn, and Emily Wells: thank you for everything.

My reading group deserves extra kudos for their invaluable comments on many, many versions of this book, especially that one time that I worked so hard to meet a deadline and subsequently slept through the first half of our discussion of my own work. Robert Colby, Shae Cox, Sean Gallagher, Lucas Kelley, Aubrey Lauersdorf, Caroline Wood Newhall, Alexandra Stern – thanks for not ending the Zoom.

Thanks to DJ Polite, my coworker and family. To Chuck Welsko, who has reacted to my writing process with sheer horror but supports me anyway. To indexer extraordinaire Beatrice Burton. To Mandy Cooper, who is so generous with her work and friendship. To the Carolines – Caroline Grego and Caroline Newhall – for answering even my most manic texts and questions throughout this process. I don't think I would be at this stage without Caroline Grego. No one, however, knows me or my work quite like Jillian Hinderliter. Every iteration of this study – from fledging thesis proposal to dissertation defense to book proposal – has passed through Jillian's hands. I love her dearly.

Thank you to everyone at Cambridge University Press for bringing this book into existence. To Mark Smith and Peter Coclans, series editors of the Cambridge Studies on the American South. To Victoria Phillips, for answering all my questions about images and dpi. And, of course, to Cecelia Cancellaro, for shepherding the entire process.

To my parents, who have been listening to me spout history facts since I started giving hours tours at age twelve. To my in-laws, for celebrating every milestone. To my sisters, who are a part of me and

xiv ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

are now a part of this book's dedication. To my husband, Brian Croft, who sometimes wakes up when I go to sleep. My strong and steady touchstone. He is very much not a historian and I love him very much. To my newborn son Henry, who gifted me with an exhausting first trimester right before this book was due.